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EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

When we speak about communication it is imperative to consider it as being cultural — it draws on ways we have learned to speak and give nonverbal messages. We do not always communicate the same way from day to day, since there are factors like context, individual personality, and mood interact usually with the variety of cultural influences we have internalized that influence our choices. Communication is meant to be interactive, so an important influence on its effectiveness is the relationship we have with others. Do they hear and understand what we are trying to say? Are they listening well? Are we listening well in response? Do their responses show that they understand the words and the meanings behind the words we have chosen? Is the mood positive and receptive? Is there trust between them and us? Are there differences that relate to ineffective communication, divergent goals or interests, or fundamentally different ways of seeing the world? The answers to these questions will give us some clues about the effectiveness of our communication and the ease with which we may be able to move through conflict.

The challenge is that even with all the good will in the world, miscommunication is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. Miscommunication may lead to conflict, or aggravate conflict that already exists. We make — whether it is clear to us or not — quite different meaning of the world, our places in it, and our relationships with others. Cross-cultural communication will be outlined and demonstrated by examples of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors involving four variables as M. LeBaron noticed :

Time and Space
Fate and Personal Responsibility
Face and Face-Saving
Nonverbal Communication

1.Time and Space

Time is considered to be one of the most important differences that separate cultures and cultural ways of doing things. In the West, time was considered as quantitative, and was measured in units that were reflecting the march of progress. It is logical, sequential, and present-focused, moving with incremental certainty toward a future the ego cannot touch and a past that is not a part of now. In the

East, time feels like it has unlimited continuity, an unraveling rather than a strict boundary. Birth and death are not supposed to be such absolute ends since the universe continues and humans, though changing form, continue as part of it. People may attend to many things happening at once in this approach to time. This may mean many conversations in a moment (such as a meeting in which people speak simultaneously, «talking over» each other as they discuss their subjects), or many times and peoples during one process (such as a ceremony in which those family members who have died are felt to be present as well as those yet to be born into the family).

It is true that cultural approaches to time or communication are not always applied in good faith, but may serve a variety of motives. Asserting power, superiority, advantage, or control over the course of the negotiations may be a motive wrapped up in certain cultural behaviors (for example, the government representatives' detailed emphasis on ratification procedures may have conveyed an implicit message of control, or the First Nations' attention to the past may have emphasized the advantages of being aware of history). Culture and cultural beliefs may be used as a tactic by negotiators; for this reason, it is important that parties be involved in collaborative-process design when addressing intractable conflicts. As people from different cultural backgrounds work together to design a process to address the issues that divide them, they can ask questions about cultural preferences about time and space and how these may affect a negotiation or conflict-resolution process, and thus inoculate against the use of culture as a tactic or an instrument to advance power.

2. Fate and Personal Responsibility

Another important variable which affects communication across cultures is fate and personal responsibility. This refers to the degree to which we feel ourselves the masters of our lives, versus the degree to which we see ourselves as subject to things outside our control. Another way to look at this is to ask how much we see ourselves able to change and maneuver, to choose the course of our lives and relationships. There has been drawn a parallel between the emphasis on personal responsibility in North American settings and the landscape itself. The North American landscape is vast, with large spaces of unpopulated territory. The frontier mentality of «conquering» the wilderness, and the expansiveness of the land stretching huge distances, may relate to generally high levels of confidence in the ability to shape

and choose our destinies.

In this expansive landscape, many children grow up with an epic sense of life, where ideas are big, and hope springs eternal. When they experience setbacks, they are encouraged to redouble their efforts, to «try, try again.» Action, efficiency, and achievement are emphasized and expected.

This variable is important for all to understanding cultural conflict. If someone invested in free will crosses paths with someone more fatalistic in orientation, miscommunication is likely. The first person may expect action and accountability. Failing to see it, they may conclude that the second is lazy, obstructionist, or dishonest. The second person will expect respect for the natural order of things. Failing to see it, they may conclude that the first is coercive or irreverent, inflated in his ideas of what can be accomplished or changed.

3.Face and Face-Saving

Another important cultural variable relates to face and face-saving. Face is important across cultures, yet the dynamics of face and face-saving play out differently. Face includes ideas of status, power, courtesy, insider and outsider relations, humor, and respect. In many cultures, maintaining face is of great importance, though ideas of how to do this vary.

The starting points of individualism and communitarianism are closely related to face. If we see ourselves as a self-determining individuals, then face has to do with preserving our image with others and ourselves. We can and should exert control in situations to achieve this goal. We may do this by taking a competitive stance in negotiations or confronting someone who we perceive to have wronged us.

Direct confrontation or problem-solving with others may reflect poorly on our group, or disturb overall community harmony. We may prefer to avoid criticism of others, even when the disappointment we have concealed may come out in other, more damaging ways later. When there is conflict that cannot be avoided, we may prefer a third party who acts as a shuttle between us and the other people involved in the conflict. Since no direct confrontation takes place, face is preserved and potential damage to the relationships or networks of relationships is minimized.

4. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is hugely important in any interaction with others; its importance is multiplied across cultures. This is because we tend to look for nonverbal cues when verbal messages are unclear or ambiguous, as they are more likely to be across

cultures (especially when different languages are being used). Since nonverbal behavior arises from our cultural common sense — our ideas about what is appropriate, normal, and effective as communication in relationships — we use different systems of understanding gestures, posture, silence, spacial relations, emotional expression, touch, physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues. Cultures also attribute different degrees of importance to verbal and nonverbal behavior.

Low-context cultures like the United States and Canada tend to give relatively less emphasis to nonverbal communication. This does not mean that nonverbal communication does not happen, or that it is unimportant, but that people in these settings tend to place less importance on it than on the literal meanings of words themselves. In high-context settings such as Japan or Colombia, understanding the nonverbal components of communication is relatively more important to receiving the intended meaning of the communication as a whole.

Some elements of nonverbal communication are consistent across cultures. For example, research has shown that the emotions of enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise are expressed in similar ways by people around the world. It may be more social acceptable in some settings in the United States for women to show fear, but not anger, and for men to display anger, but not fear. At the same time, interpretation of facial expressions across cultures is difficult. In China and Japan, for example, a facial expression that would be recognized around the world as conveying happiness may actually express anger or mask sadness, both of which are unacceptable to show overtly.

These differences of interpretation may lead to conflict, or escalate existing conflict. Suppose a Japanese person is explaining her absence from negotiations due to a death in her family. She may do so with a smile, based on her cultural belief that it is not appropriate to inflict the pain of grief on others. For a Westerner who understands smiles to mean friendliness and happiness, this smile may seem incongruous and even cold, under the circumstances. Even though some facial expressions may be similar across cultures, their interpretations remain culture-specific. It is important to understand something about cultural starting-points and values in order to interpret emotions expressed in cross-cultural interactions.

Crossing cultures, we get across very different ideas about polite space for conversations and negotiations. North Americans tend to prefer a large amount of

space, perhaps because they are surrounded by it in their homes and countryside. Europeans tend to stand more closely with each other when talking, and are accustomed to smaller personal spaces.

The difficulty with space preferences is not that they exist, but the judgments that get attached to them. If someone is accustomed to standing or sitting very close when they are talking with another, they may see the other's attempt to create more space as evidence of coldness, condescension, or a lack of interest. Those who are accustomed to more personal space may view attempts to get closer as pushy, disrespectful, or aggressive.

Line-waiting behavior and behavior in group settings like grocery stores or government offices is culturally-influenced. Novinger reports that the English and U.S. Americans are serious about standing in lines, in accordance with their beliefs in democracy and the principle of «first come, first served.» The French, on the other hand, have a practice of line jumping, that irritates many British and U.S. Americans. Or, immigrants from Armenia report that it is difficult to adjust to a system of waiting in line, when their home context permitted one member of a family to save spots for several others.

Careful observation, ongoing study from a variety of sources, and cultivating relationships across cultures will all help to develop the cultural fluency to work effectively with nonverbal communication differences that we may encounter.

Conclusions:

Each of the variables discussed — time and space, personal responsibility and fate, face and face-saving, and nonverbal communication — are much more complex than it is possible to convey. Each of them influences the course of communications, and can be responsible for conflict or the escalation of conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misinterpretation. A culturally-fluent approach to conflict means working over time to understand these and other ways communication varies across cultures, and applying these understandings in order to enhance relationships across differences.

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